

## **Leaving No School Counselor Behind**

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School improvement is hard work. But if schools are not constantly improving and growing in their capacity to meet the needs of today's students, then they are losing ground and failing in their mission of service to young people (Fitzpatrick, 1997).

### **Introduction**

School improvement is equated with accountability, which focuses attention on closing the achievement gap and moving critical data elements in a positive direction. Administrators, teachers, and every member of the school staff are expected to contribute to the comprehensive structure of school (i.e., curriculum, teaching, student outcomes, and climate). Accountability is everyone's responsibility, including school counselors as well as students, parents, and the community at large. With the federal, state, and local emphasis on accountability, it is essential that the school counselors demonstrate how school counseling programs contribute to the school success agenda and to successful outcomes for students.

The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) is a clear imperative for school counselors to accept the responsibility to support academic achievement, share the pressures of school accountability, and demonstrate advocacy for every student to experience success. School counselors had not been held to the same accountability standards as other educators. They were rarely included in the conversations as to their contributions that have an impact on the critical data elements that are publicly displayed on school report cards. In a climate of

school improvement, it has become increasingly important for school counselors to play a proactive role in identifying and responding to the issues, policies, and practices that stratify student opportunity and inhibit access to equitable educational opportunities.

School counselors who address improving student results will contribute to raising the achievement level for every student. By examining their practice and looking carefully at their way of working, school counselors can articulate and communicate how their contributions positively affect student achievement and, thus, share accountability for school improvement with other members of the faculty. Partnership with education professionals demonstrates a willingness to improve results and to help to close the achievement gap that exists among students of color and students of poverty. The school counseling program, which is now aligned with the educational enterprise, is data driven, proactive and preventive in focus, and assists students in acquiring and applying lifelong learning skills. School counselors can advocate for the academic success for every student while delivering the content of the school counseling program in a comprehensive and accountable manner.

### **What Does Accountability Mean to School Counselors?**

School counselors traditionally have offered time-on-task data (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000) or a numerical summary of the different types of activities delivered as a means of assessing and evaluating the impact of a school counseling program. Merely presenting the numbers of students seen individually, in groups, or in classrooms is no longer enough. Legislators, school boards, administrators, and faculty concerned with accountability issues may not see the work of school counselors as being an effective utilization of financial resources to improve student achievement.

Accountability offers the opportunity for school counselors to demonstrate how they can effectively identify and rectify issues that impede student achievement.

Closing the gap in student performance is central to influencing systemic change. The use of demographic and performance data

makes it possible for counselors to determine how policies and practices are affecting issues of equity. Student achievement data can be collected and analyzed systematically to inform and guide the development and construction of a school counseling program based upon schoolwide issues. Annual school report cards publicize critical data elements such as attendance, demographics, graduation and postsecondary planning rates, and standardized testing results. These can be monitored and analyzed over a period of time. When school counselors use this same school-based data, they demonstrate support for the mission of the school: student success.

### **Data: Friend or Pho-bia?**

Data inform and challenge our thinking to determine the need for systemic change, confirm progress, and reveal shortcomings in student performance. Closely examining critical data elements in the areas of attendance, socioeconomic impact on class enrollment, graduation and postsecondary planning rates, and standardized testing results not only identifies the needs of your students but also the school/system -wide issues that impact success. By using data, school counselors can present a picture of the current situation of student needs and issues and examine the practices that can lead to higher levels of success.

Disaggregating data by variables such as ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, or teacher assignment is very important in the analysis of student performance. The disaggregation of data makes it possible to determine how policy and practices affect issues of equity. It is now possible to more closely examine which groups of students are successful and which are meeting failure. Using data enables school counselors to work closely with building administrators and faculty to close the achievement gap. School counselors who focus their efforts on moving data in a positive direction demonstrate a strong commitment to sharing the responsibility and accountability for student outcomes.

## MEASURE- ing Success

MEASURE is an accountability process for school counselors to identify and positively impact the critical data elements that are the important barometers of student success. MEASURE is an acronym to help school counselors remember:

*Mission:* Connect your program to the mission of your school and to the goals of your annual school improvement plan.

*Elements:* Identify the critical data elements that are important to the internal and external stakeholders.

*Analyze:* Carefully discuss which elements need to be aggregated or disaggregated and why.

*Stakeholders – Unite:* Determine which stakeholders need to be involved in addressing this school improvement issue and unite to develop strategies.

*Reanalyze:* Rethink and refine your strategies; refocus your efforts as needed and reflect on your success.

*Educate:* Show the positive impact the school counseling program has on student achievement and on the goals of your school's improvement plan.

MEASURE requires school counselors to collaborate and team with administrators, faculty, and stakeholders to identify and positively impact the critical data elements that are important barometers of student success (Dahir & Stone, 2003). MEASURE supports the accountability component of the American School Counselor Association (2003) *National Model* by helping school counselors move from a "counting tasks" system to aligning the school counseling program with standards-based reform. This process enables school counselors to demonstrate how they are accountable for results and contribute to student achievement.

Sharing accountability can be confusing at times and the results sometimes disappointing. Systematically collecting, analyzing, and using data to inform and guide the development and construction shows the commitment of school counselors to

- Focus on student achievement and contribute to the school and system's improvement goals;
- Identify issues that stratify student opportunities;
- Integrate conclusions and decisions on data, research, and professional standards;
- Demonstrate a commitment to school improvement through sharing accountability for results by moving critical data elements.

School counselors working within an accountability framework can challenge the pervasive belief that socioeconomic status and color determine a young person's ability to learn. Accepting the challenge of accountability propels school counselors to accept the responsibility of removing barriers to learning and achievement and raise the level of expectations for those students for whom little is expected. Acting as agents of school and community change, school counselors can create a climate where access and support for quality and rigor is the norm. In doing so, underserved and underrepresented students now have a chance at acquiring the education skills necessary to fully participate in the twenty-first century economy. With an accountable, data-driven school counseling program, school counselors are seen as powerful partners and collaborators in school improvement and essential to fulfill the mission of every school.

## References

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